

The University of Chicago

CARLYLE AND THE AMERICAN
TRANSCENDENTALISTS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
JUNE, 1941

By
WILLIAM SILAS VANCE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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CHAPTER VI

WALT WHITMAN

1

The relation of Walt Whitman to Thomas Carlyle has never been adequately treated. We might almost say, it has never been treated at all. This, in spite of the widespread interest which has been manifested for several decades in the literary origins and relationships of the poet. The fullest discussion of his relation to Carlyle is found in Mr. Norman Foerster's volume on American Criticism, and there we have no more than a few statements showing that Whitman read and greatly admired the Scotchman.¹ No study of even a fair degree of thoroughness has ever been made of Carlyle's actual influence upon the American poet. Most of Whitman's biographers acknowledge this influence and pass on. Mr. Emory Holloway, one of the latest and best of these, gives but brief notice to it, yet not without observing that had Carlyle examined Leaves of Grass he "might have recognized something of his Sartor Resartus in more than the style of the book."² Practically all students of Whitman recognize the influence of Carlyle, but not one of them has undertaken definitely to bring to light the substance and extent of this influence.

That Whitman was an interested and practically a life-long student of Carlyle is now well known. As early as 1846 he had read Sartor Resartus, Heroes and Hero-Worship, The French Revolution, Past and Present, and Chartism.³ Although we have few records of his reading, for he studiously avoided referring to it; yet we know that before the end of his life he had fairly exhausted Carlyle. His friend Horace Traubel wrote in July, 1888,

¹(Boston, 1928), pp. 126 ff.

²Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative (New York, 1926), p. 136.

³Emory Holloway, Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman (Garden City, 1921), I, 129 ff.

that Whitman had not read The Life of John Sterling and Frederick the Great.¹ Sterling he later read this same year.² Frederick the Great he probably never read in its entirety, though he reviewed in the Brooklyn Times the first volume when it came out in 1858,³ and later expressed general opinions on the entire work.⁴ In his last years he read with avidity all the posthumous publications of Carlyle he could secure, and the chief works concerning him. The persistence of his reading of Carlyle in this period of his infirmity rather indicates that he was leaving no stone unturned in his study of Carlyle. Almost as soon as they appeared, and against the advice of his friend and physician,⁵ he read all the volumes of Froude's Life of Carlyle,⁶ all the Carlyle-Emerson letters,⁷ the Carlyle-Goethe letters,⁸ the several volumes of Carlyle's Early Letters,⁹ and The Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle.¹⁰ Late in 1891, he was reading Carlyle's Diary of a trip to Paris.¹¹ A German biographer rightly observes: "Bei ständig sinkenden Kräften des Leibes blieb er geistig rege, las viel, vor allem jetzt Carlyles Schriften, und nahm in kleineren Aufsätzen lebhaft Stellung dazu."¹² Whitman had little praise for the writings of Moncure Conway, but his book on Carlyle he read.¹³ Burroughs' writings on Carlyle he had always read and praised.¹⁴

Whitman's admiration of Carlyle was profound--at times,

¹Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden (New York, 1914), II, 52. (Hereafter referred to as "Traubel.")

²Traubel, II, 98, 106.

³Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwarz, I Sit and Look Out; Editorials from the Brooklyn Daily Times by Walt Whitman (New York, 1932), p. 68.

⁴Traubel, II, 52, 524.

⁵Traubel, II, 334, 338.

⁶Traubel, II, 252, 274, 296, 305, 317.

⁷Traubel, II, 195, 250.

⁸Traubel, III, 410, 433, 435.

⁹Traubel, III, 484, 523, 529.

¹⁰Traubel, II, 339, 454.

¹¹J. Johnston and J. W. Wallace, Visits to Walt Whitman (New York, 1918), p. 178.

¹²Hans Reisiger, Walt Whitmans Werk (Berlin, 1922), I, xcvi-viii (Introduction).

¹³Traubel, II, 217, 527.

¹⁴Traubel, I, 285.

even reverential. His earliest recorded expressions on him in 1846 reveal already a lively interest. Reviewing Heroes and Hero-Worship in the Brooklyn Eagle in that year, Whitman characterizes the author as "this truly good thinker."¹ Elsewhere in the same review he writes: "Under his rapt, weird (grotesque?) style the writer of this work has place many noble thoughts."² In all his early reviews in the Brooklyn Eagle Whitman has nothing but praise for Carlyle, with a single exception. In the very first of them he falls into the usual conventional outcry against Carlyle's style;³ but that same style, it may be noted, he describes a month later as "an original kind of composition, that gets after a little usage, to be strangely agreeable."⁴ "Carlyle's genius," he finds, concluding his review of the French Revolution, "is too broad a subject and provokes too many inferences, to be properly treated in one of these short notices."⁵ Though they do not tell us very much, these short, laudatory newspaper articles reveal a real interest in Carlyle--as, indeed, the fact that Whitman reviews, while editor, more than twice as many of his volumes as those of any other author, itself, suggests. Among much else, he discovered in the Scotch peasant and general castigator of his times a fellow "democrat in that enlarged sense," one whose "eyes are clear to the numerous ills which afflict humanity, . . . quick to champion the downtrodden, and earnest in his wrath at tyranny."⁶

Whitman never discarded this judgment that Carlyle, in spite of his later severe and provoking strictures upon democracy, was essentially a democrat. Late in life he said to Traubel, "Carlyle was a good deal of a democrat in spite of himself."⁷ Towards his rasping criticism of America and her democratic institutions, Whitman was surprisingly tolerant.

Who cares that he wrote about Dr. Francia, and "Shooting Niagara"--and "The Nigger Question," and didn't at all admire our United States? (I doubt if he ever thought or said half as bad words about us as we deserve.)⁸

At another time he exclaims: "O that the United States could have

¹Uncollected Poetry and Prose, I, 129.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., I, 130.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., I, 129.

⁷Traubel, I, 92.

⁸Prose Works (New York and London, 1902), I, 307.

had a long visit and explorative jaunt, from Thomas Carlyle, how is it possible but that the right understanding would ensue."¹ Several years later he asks: "Upon the whole, was not Carlyle (like an honest and stern physician)--the true friend of our age?"² With all his high faith in American democracy, sometimes its failings caused Whitman to picture the old Chelsea sage in this vein: "When I hear those politicians making such noisy thunder about their American protection--on the platform, in speeches, in editorial platitudes--I think of Carlyle--of his brave, contemptuous smile--yes, I see Carlyle--thrown back in his chair--so, so--and having his hell of a laugh!"³ But the chief importance of Carlyle to Whitman, so far as democracy is concerned, was that he was of the common people, and a defender of the rights of the common man.

Though he was no chartist or radical, I consider Carlyle's by far the most indignant comment or protest anent the fruits of feudalism today in Great Britain--the increasing poverty and degradation of the homeless, landless twenty millions, while a few thousands, or rather a few hundreds, possess the entire soil, the money, and the fat births. . . . Aristocracy cannot begin to salve or defend such stupendous hogghishness.⁴

It was Whitman's expressed rule to "make no quotations and no reference to any other writers."⁵ Yet Carlyle, before his death in 1881, is quoted and alluded to some score of times in Whitman's formal writings and notes. In January, 1856, he makes note of the fact that he is "reading Carlyle's criticisms on Goethe."⁶ Then follow facts of Goethe's life, probably gleaned from Carlyle, and several pages of criticism in the Carlylean vein.⁷ He writes that Carlyle "seems to have been the introducer of Goethe and the principal German writers from 1827 onward 10 years."⁸ Later he is more positive: "Carlyle certainly introduced the German style, writers, sentimentalism, transcendentalism etc. etc. etc. from 1826 to 1840--through the great reviews and magazines--and through his own works and example."⁹ Other items found in the published notes of Whitman are the following:

¹Ibid., III, 103. ²Ibid., III, 145. ³Traubel, I, 367.

⁴Prose Works, I, 308.

⁵Ibid., VI, 4.

⁶Ibid., VI, 110.

⁷Ibid., VI, 110 ff.

⁸Ibid., VI, 117.

⁹Ibid., VI, 123.

Carlyle vaunts him as showing that a man can live even these days as an "antique worthy." That vaunt Goethe deserves.¹

Zerdusht. Zoroaster? "The Chaldeans or ancient Persians with their Zerdusht" Carlyle.²

Carlyle, born 1795, Nov. ('57), aged 62.³

Dec. '57. Carlyle's Frederick the Great is announced to be now in press.⁴

Appearance of Carlyle 1827.⁵

Nibelungenlied--song of Nibelung (author unknown)--it is objective like the Iliad. Probably dates back to about the 6th or 7th century. Carlyle supposing it to be about the third redaction (digestion) from its primitive form out of myths, acts, traditions, or what not.⁶

This [referring to passage in George William Curtis' lecture] is stolen from Carlyle.⁷

"The wayward mystic gloom of Calderon."

"The lurid fire of Dante."

"The auroral light of Tasso."

"The clear icy glitter of Racine." Carlyle.⁸

We have already seen that in his journalistic writings of 1846 Whitman devoted generous space and attention to Carlyle. Following this date a large portion of Whitman's newspaper editorials are either unpreserved or unpublished. Those which are accessible show his continued interest in that curiously mystic and worldly sage. Over ten years later, in an editorial in the Brooklyn Daily Times, he quotes from Heroes.⁹ The next year (1858) he reviews the first volume of Frederick; and among other things announces that "a new work by the author of Sartor Resartus is no common event under any circumstances." Concluding his short criticism of the work, he writes: "We do not perceive that the hand that penned the History of the French Revolution has, as yet, lost anything of its cunning."¹⁰ Finally in January, 1859,

¹Ibid., VI, 112. ²Ibid., VI, 228. ³Ibid., VI, 229.

⁴Ibid., VI, 230. ⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., VI, 83. Carlyle wrote in "The Nibelungen Lied" (1831): "Our actual Nibelungen Lied is nowise the original Narrative, but the second, or even the third redaction of one much earlier." (Essays, II, 266.) Note Whitman's appropriation of Carlyle's word "redaction," he himself being obviously unsure about it.

⁷Ibid., VII, 8.

⁸Ibid., VII, 14.

⁹I Sit and Look Out, p. 71.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 68.

he treats Carlyle himself editorially.¹

In Democratic Vistas, published in 1871, being written partly in defense of American democracy against Carlyle's onslaught in Shooting Niagara, Whitman, with his usual generosity towards the Scotch sage, refers to him as "an eminent and venerable person abroad," and then further explains in a footnote:

Shooting Niagara.--I was at first roused to much anger and abuse by this essay from Mr. Carlyle, so insulting to the theory of America,--but happening to think afterwards how I had more than once been in the like mood, during which his essay was evidently cast, and seen persons and things in the same light (indeed some might say there are signs of the same feeling in these Vistas), I have since read it again, . . . as coming from an earnest soul and as contributing certain sharp-cutting metallic grains, which, if not gold or silver, may be good, hard, honest iron.²

Rarely has an American, devoted to American ideals as was Whitman, shown such tolerance towards a vicious attack upon those ideals. Nothing shows so well the measure of Whitman's attachment to this critic of America as his generosity towards him. "Never had political progressiveism a foe it could more heartily respect,"³ he wrote ten years later.

Carlyle was perhaps the only man of Whitman's time who continued to enjoy his high regard after showing scorn for his country and even ridicule and indifference for the man and his writings. Whitman, who was so apt to measure his contemporaries by their attitude towards Leaves of Grass, made a distinct exception of Carlyle. In 1872 he sent to the aged Scotchman two of his books--Democratic Vistas and American Institute Poem--and wrote him the following letter: "Following an impulse of the moment, I have just mailed to you two little books of mine--writing this to introduce them--and taking permission to personally offer, as it were, from America true respects and love."⁴ Whitman got no reply.⁵ Several years later Traubel asked him if Carlyle had ever made "any bows" in his direction. Whitman laughed: "Not one: I was outside to Carlyle."⁶ On a later occasion when he read that the caustic humorist had referred to him as "the fel-

¹Ibid., p. 196; access could not be had to the contents of this editorial.

²Prose Works, II, 71.

³Ibid., I, 316.

⁴Traubel, II, 326-27.

⁵Traubel, I, 91.

⁶Traubel, II, 328.

low who thinks he must be a big man because he lives in a big country," "Whitman," according to Traubel, "was highly amused. Exploded in quiet chuckles."¹ From no one else did Whitman receive personal criticism or neglect with such good-natured forbearance. And so far as we can tell, this attitude of Carlyle towards the poet did not affect at all the latter's high esteem for him. "Although Carlyle was dourly suspicious of him," writes a recent student of Whitman, "he was loud in his praise of Carlyle."²

The most complete formal expression of Whitman's attachment to Carlyle was occasioned by the latter's death in 1881. Whitman then wrote more in the spirit of a disciple than he ever wrote elsewhere before or afterwards. The death of no other man during his life evoked from him such a personal and laudatory outburst. Though an attempt at sane criticism, the long essay comes very near being pure rhapsody, almost every line of it revealing a genuine and profound attachment to the man. Thus he begins:

And so the flame of the lamp, after long wasting and flickering, has gone out entirely. As a representative author, a literary figure, no man else will bequeath to the future more significant hints of our stormy era, its fierce paradoxes, its din, and its struggling parturition periods, than Carlyle. He belongs to our own branch of the stock, too; neither Latin nor Greek, but altogether Gothic. Rugged, mountainous, volcanic, he was himself more a French Revolution than any of his volumes. In some respects, so far in the nineteenth century, the best equipt, keenest mind, even from the college point of view, of all Britain.³

Only a few other illustrative passages from this ardent, almost singular, piece of criticism by an American of an English author, may be quoted:

Not for his merely literary merit (though that was great) --not as "maker of Books," but as launching into the self-complacent atmosphere of our days a rasping, questioning, dislocating agitation and shock, is Carlyle's final value. It is time the English-speaking peoples had some true idea about the verteber of genius, namely power. As if they must always have it cut and bias'd to the fashion, like a lady's cloak! What a needed service he performs! How he shakes our comfortable reading circles with a touch of the old Hebraic anger and prophecy.

¹Traubel, III, 15.

²Harold Blodgett, Walt Whitman in England (Ithaca, N.Y., 1934), p. 161.

³Prose Works, I, 305.

Then the simplicity and amid ostensible frailty the towering strength of this man--a hardy oak knot, you could never wear out--an old farmer dress'd in brown clothes, and not handsome--his very foibles fascinating. . . .

The way to test how much he has left his country were to consider, or try to consider, for a moment, the array of British thought, the resultant ensemble of the last fifty years, as existing today, but with Carlyle left out. It would be like an army with no artillery. The show were still a gay and rich one--Byron, Scott, Tennyson, and many more--horsemen and rapid infantry, and banners flying--but the last heavy roar so dear to the ear of the trained soldier, and that settles fate and victory, would be lacking.

For the last three years we in America have had transmitted glimpses of a thin-bodied, lonesome, wifeless, childless, very old man, lying on a sofa, kept out of bed by indomitable will, but, of late, never well enough to take the open air. I have noted the news from time to time in brief descriptions in the papers. A week ago I read such an item just before I started out for my customary evening stroll between eight and nine. In the fine cold night, unusually clear (Feb. 5, '81), as I walked some open grounds adjacent, the condition of Carlyle, and his approaching,--perhaps even then actual--death, filled me with thoughts eluding statement, and curiously blending with the scene. [Then follows a page describing the stars and the clear night.] While through the whole of this silent indescribable show, inclosing and bathing my whole receptivity, ran the thought of Carlyle dying. . . .

And now that he has gone hence, can it be that Thomas Carlyle, soon to chemically dissolve in ashes and by winds, remains an identity still? In ways perhaps eluding all the statements, lore, and speculations of ten thousand years--eluding all possible statements to mortal sense--does he yet exist, a definite, vital being, a spirit, an individual? . . . I have no doubt of it.¹

Some months after this rather personal and emotional expression on Carlyle, Whitman returned to him in a second article, more critical and detached, and even longer than the first. The second statement adds little to what he had already said; it may be worth noting that he, now approaching Carlyle in a more critical mood, yet writes: "I don't know anything more amazing than these persistent strides and throbbings so far through our nineteenth century of perhaps its biggest, sharpest, and most erudite brain."² A few years later he quotes (a rare practice with Whitman) a paragraph from Carlyle on John Knox, in his notes on Elias Hicks, observing that "what Carlyle says of John Knox will apply to him."³ Still later, in "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads,"

¹Prose Works, I, 306-10.

²Ibid., I, 317.

³Ibid., III, 270.

he links Carlyle's name with the "Greek aesthetes," Shakspeare, Tennyson, Victor Hugo, and Emerson, as "artistic expressers."¹ Finally, it may be mentioned that, after the poet's death, were found among the papers preserved by him an article on "Thackeray and Carlyle," and extracts from Carlyle's Past and Present, torn, after Whitman's habit when he liked a thing, from a book and annotated by him.²

In Traubel's three large volumes, entitled With Walt Whitman in Camden,³ based upon his almost daily visits with Whitman during the ten months from March 28, 1888, to January 20, 1889, we have full reproductions of Whitman's conversation during these visits. They contain a veritable mine of information as to his interests and opinions at the time. His talk, always spontaneous and rambling, took in many subjects and persons. That on Carlyle was profuse. During the 300 days (a little less than 300) the name of the distinguished Scotchman entered into Whitman's conversation on more than 100 different occasions. Comparisons may be of interest, so we give below the approximate number of times other important literary men entered into the conversation:

Emerson	145	Thoreau	16
Shakspeare . . .	59	Lowell	13
Tennyson	44	Poe	11
Arnold	30	Browning	8
Bryant	21	Hawthorne	6
Longfellow . . .	21	Huxley	6
Goethe	18	Ruskin	5
Whittier	17	Irving	2
Burns	17	Hegel	2
Scott	16	Macaulay	1

Among literary figures, with the exception of Emerson, Carlyle was the most prominent in Whitman's conversation at this time. The prominence of Emerson was no doubt due in part to causes other than literary. He was near Whitman personally, being an American, a friend whom he had visited and talked with often, and the first important man to place his approval upon the poet. Such men as John Burroughs, Dr. R. M. Bucke, and W. D. O'Connor

¹Leaves of Grass (New York, 1902), III, 58-59.

²Prose Works, VII, 84.

³Traubel's representation of Whitman in these volumes appears not entirely reliable. But whatever errors he may have fallen into in seeking to give distinctive color to Whitman's character would hardly affect seriously the uses which are made of the volumes in this study.

are more prominent in the conversation than any of those listed above, but Whitman's interest in them was, not as writers, but chiefly as friends. Something of the same, no doubt, partly explains Whitman's preoccupation with Emerson: he was a friend and the most eminent of his fellow-Americans. However it should be noted, in this connection, that Emerson had been dead over six years, Carlyle over seven; so that both had become to Whitman in 1888 and 1889 something of historical figures.

It may be explained that the importance of Carlyle in his conversation at this time was due partly to that fact that Whitman was doing a great deal of reading in Carlyle (letters, biographies, reminiscences, etc.). He was constantly asking Traubel to secure for him Carlyle books, reading these, and from time to time commenting upon them. Without doubt, this partly accounts for the prominence of Carlyle's name. But the explanation, in so far as it explains away the interest of Whitman in Carlyle, largely nullifies itself; for the fact that Whitman, old and infirm, persistently read Carlyle, against advice, and when he might have read less gloomy things, itself, bespeaks his unusual interest.

Now the significant question naturally is, What did Whitman have to say about Carlyle? His rambling and unpremeditated talks touched rather variously and fully the many-sided character and activities of the mystic sage. Relative to the controversy over Carlyle's domestic life and character, Whitman always defended the man. On one occasion, after talking of Burroughs' visit to Carlyle, of Carlyle's laugh, and repeating one of Carlyle's stories, told to him by Burroughs, he digressed to express his approval of Mrs. Gilcrist's denunciation of the harsh things said of Carlyle after his death, insisting, by way of clinching his point, that "she was their neighbor, a frequent visitor in their home."¹ On a later occasion, referring to the Carlyle scandal, he said:

I have no patience with it. And besides, I feel that I know all about that story, and on good authority, too: from no less a person than Mrs. Gilcrist, who associated with both the Carlyles intimately and was in no sense a woman to be fooled. I attach oh! so great an importance to all she said to me on that subject; facts, pertinent facts, weighty: things she saw, again and again--goings on--enough to turn

¹Traubel, II, 131.

topsy-turvy the alleged truths of newspaper gossip, the indecent generalizations of scribblers.¹

After this vigorous defense, he concedes, "That Carlyle was high strung is true," and then adds,

Mrs. Carlyle, too, had a temper--one you may be bound, that was not always reined in. Jane Carlyle was the wife of a great man--of one of the greatest men of his time, of any time.²

Still later he affirms: "Nothing that I read seems to change my opinion of Carlyle."³

For what he read of Carlyle's during these days, Whitman usually had high praise. "I have been reading the Emerson-Carlyle letters," he said; "they are interesting to me from the word go: historic letters, letters of genius, in some respects the most remarkable letters in all English literature."⁴ Of the Life of Sterling he said:

It is interesting. . . . Today I struck upon the chapter on Coleridge--was intensely interested. It mainly hits the nail on the head--is just as true as it is enjoyable.⁵

To the Carlyle-Goethe letters he referred with pleasure, because they "treat such an interesting period of Carlyle's life." The "initial rejoicing," he explained, lay in "the revelation of good things before unsuspected in Carlyle."⁶

Of Carlyle himself, his genius, and his fame, Whitman had much to say--far too much to go into with fulness here. A few quotations, taken from the different volumes, will suffice:

That last spark, that sharp flash of power, that something or other which gives life to all great literature, . . . it was in Carlyle.⁷

He [Matthew Arnold] will not be missed. There is no gap, as with the going of men like Carlyle.⁸

I am disposed to think of him as more significant than any modern man.⁹

Poor Carlyle! poor Carlyle! the good fellow! the good fellow!¹⁰

Take Tennyson, Carlyle--the noble Carlyle.¹¹

¹Traubel, II, 238.

²Ibid.

³Traubel, II, 317.

⁴Traubel, II, 195.

⁵Traubel, II, 98, 106.

⁶Traubel, III, 436.

⁷Traubel, I, 71.

⁸Traubel, I, 45.

⁹Traubel, II, 300.

¹⁰Traubel, III, 70.

¹¹Traubel, III, 165.

I look in all men for the heroic quality I find in Caesar, Carlyle, Emerson.¹

This master stroke: this gun of guns: for depth, power, reverberation, unspeakably supreme--this was: Carlyle.²

Carlyle is always grist to my mill, no matter what form he comes in or where he comes from.³

Perhaps even more convincing than the above quotations of Carlyle's large importance to Whitman was the latter's habit of making the Scotchman a sort of composite by which he measured and characterized men and things. Carlyle becomes a pivot around which Whitman's world swings, a sort of giant, elements of whom he sees in others. More than once Whitman repeats one of Carlyle's stories.⁴ Frequently he cites Carlyle as an example.⁵ He speaks of "the Carlylean point of view with respect to America,"⁶ of "Carlylean humor,"⁷ of "Carlylean fire,"⁸ and of "Carlyle's treatment of the common man."⁹ Discussing men, he observes: "Cooper had a growl--the cynicism of Carlyle, without the top-lofticalness with which Carlyle carried it off."¹⁰ "Bryant had all that was knotty, gnarled in Dante, Carlyle."¹¹ "Jackson had something of Carlyle in him, . . . was always finally honest like Carlyle."¹² O'Grady "springs from Carlyle on one side."¹³ "Heine . . . was Hellenistic--full of fact, circumstance: as packed with it as Goethe, Carlyle."¹⁴ Asked why Gilchrist came to America, he explains by drawing an analogy between his move and one of Carlyle's.¹⁵ He finds himself "like Carlyle" in that he has always had a longing to get into "the practical activities of life."¹⁶ Also, "Carlyle always cried and fussed like the devil when he started a new book. . . . I threaten to follow suit."¹⁷

¹Traubel, I, 59.

²Traubel, III, 70.

³Traubel, III, 19.

⁴Traubel, II, 131; III, 485.

⁵Traubel, I, 448; II, 241, 336, 561; III, 165, 327.

⁶Traubel, I, 223.

⁷Traubel, II, 468.

⁸Traubel, II, 394.

⁹Traubel, I, 448.

¹⁰Traubel, II, 531.

¹¹Traubel, II, 532.

¹²Traubel, III, 30.

¹³Traubel, III, 42.

¹⁴Traubel, II, 561.

¹⁵Traubel, II, 536.

¹⁶Traubel, II, 241.

¹⁷Traubel, II, 398.

In an earlier year he had said: "I, . . . like Carlyle, have little belief in reform talk."¹ But sometimes a contrast will serve: "Its not 'this cursed book' with me as with Carlyle."² This frequent and forceful use made of Carlyle's name seems to indicate that Carlyle was at the very center of Whitman's world. Of no other name during his life, it is significant to observe, did Whitman make such varied use.

One further word must be said concerning Whitman's expressed opinions of Carlyle. For the same Whitman who showed so many evidences of great admiration for the thundering prophet, who at times became fairly rhapsodic over him, on some other less frequent occasions spoke in quite a different vein. The rhapsodist once alluded to "the good fellow!" "the noble Carlyle!" as "that terrible fellow--that terrible octopus--who kept forever growling out to us that we were all going wrong here in America."³ At another time he said:

Carlyle was satisfied with nobody, . . . was a damnable dispeptic, Presbyterian, temperament--all the more nasty, horrible, to me because I insist upon a more affable attitude towards society. . . . Carlyle's very existence was an insult to the Almighty--a slap in the face of the universe.⁴

The Carlyle-Emerson correspondence, which he praised so highly, he also found "open to one charge from the critic. . . . Its a little like two masters of fashion trying to outbow each other."⁵ These strictures, and perhaps a half-dozen others like them that might be quoted, will give no difficulty to those knowing Carlyle and Whitman. The comment on the letters, of course, but reflects Whitman the impressionistic critic. It shows clearly that he was something of a rebel against over-refined manners as well as over-refined literature. The more scathing strictures upon Carlyle himself, seemingly difficult of reconciliation with Whitman's high praise of the man, are largely explained by Carlyle's many-sided temperament. The reaction we see here in Whitman to Carlyle is paralleled in all the prominent disciples of this caustic but often inspiring critic of life. The discipleship of James Anthony

¹Edward Carpenter, Days with Walt Whitman (New York, 1908), pp. 38-39.

²Traubel, II, 416.

³Traubel, I, 193.

⁴Traubel, II, 306.

⁵Traubel, II, 217.

Froude may not be doubted, yet he had so many harsh things to say of Carlyle in his biography as to start a thirty-years verbal war about his name. Ruskin was a devoted friend throughout life, openly declared his discipleship, thought himself "the man who probably of all men living most honored" Carlyle,¹ and strongly reflects his influence in his writings; yet more than once he was provoked into saying harsh things about his master.² Huxley, always acknowledging Carlyle's influence on his youth, professed that he "should not yield to the most devoted of his followers in gratitude for the bracing wholesome influence of his writings";³ yet he wrote late in life: "Few men can have dissented more strongly from his way of looking at things than I."⁴ John Burroughs, a devoted admirer,--who loved "this Scotch Jeremiah as I love few men," to whom this "towering and God-like man" "was worth all other Britons put together"⁵--could yet write of him: "One tires of Carlyle's groaning and appealing to heaven. He did no work cheerfully and uncomplainingly. He should have been thankful that he had work to do. What an outcry, and yet all the time invoking the silence!"⁶ Even the mild-mannered Emerson, devoted and life-long friend and admirer, was provoked to write Carlyle:

How can I write you? Your mood is not mine, and you choose to sit like Destiny at the door of nations and predict calamity, and contradict your Morale, and with irresistible wit and ridicule shatter the attempts of little men at charity and humanity, and uphold the offender.⁷

Carlyle was gifted with a genius that profoundly impressed and attracted to him a large number of his younger brilliant contemporaries; but at the same time, there was that in his nature--

¹Edward T. Cook, Life of John Ruskin (London, 1911), II, 117.

²Ibid., II, 117, 562.

³Leonard Huxley, Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley (London, 1900), II, 34.

⁴Ibid., II, 34.

⁵Clara Barrus, Life of John Burroughs (Boston, 1925), II, 344, 222.

⁶Ibid., II, 406.

⁷J. E. Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston, 1885), II, 242-43.

strong and even contradictory feelings and convictions, candid and uncompromising speech, a turbulently restless and changing temperament, perhaps something of scorn and pride and arrogance--which, in one way or another, provoked every one of them at times to all but a breaking point. Indeed, the most ardent of his disciples were the ones most apt to be stung and provoked to harsh and angry words about Carlyle. Less ardent disciples--say like Dickens--were apt to be more tolerant and consistently genial with him.

Whitman was undoubtedly one of those strongly attracted, but at times sorely provoked. And it was entirely characteristic of this American individualist to give free expression to his jarred feelings. His own "master" Emerson, who was so much less apt to cause provocation than Carlyle, did not entirely escape. "Emerson," he said, was in "some ways rather of thin blood,"¹ when evidently piqued because the New Englander never again came out with the clear and positive approval he gave in 1855.

A violent outcry against an individual often denotes a deep interest in him. This seems peculiarly true with reference to Whitman's attitude towards Carlyle. Ruskin and Arnold showed about as much contempt for America as Carlyle, yet we hear almost nothing from Whitman concerning them, simply because he was not interested in them. Carlyle mattered; they did not. Whitman almost invariably reveals the profound admiration underlying his criticism of Carlyle at the very time he criticizes. How characteristic it is of him to conclude a harsh criticism with a kindly amendment! After saying, as quoted above, that "Carlyle's very existence was a slap in the face of the universe," he went on to add: "But there's more than that to Carlyle: I do not hide the fact from myself; gleams of suns--almost paradisaical haloings."² Here is another fair sample of his freely voiced objections to the complaining sage:

Carlyle was satisfied with nobody, nothing: no god existed for him: reform was a sham, democracy a humbug, civilization a lie; everything was wrong ended--everything meant despair--dead death. But the question returns and returns again: was not Carlyle more than that? Was he not true, the honest reflex of some incontrovertible fact? And there I stick.³

¹Traubel, I, 23.

²Traubel, II, 306.

³Traubel, II, 334-35.

After perhaps the longest denunciation of Carlyle Whitman ever made, he went on to add: "I always tell myself after speaking freely of Carlyle--there is yet more to be said: he was needed, he was great, he was important to this age perhaps beyond any other."¹ Traubel put in, "Carlyle has done me good." Whitman: "I am glad to hear you say that, Horace: he has done me good, too--immense, incalculable good: that is what I always allow whatever has been denied."²

It is little surprising that Whitman occasionally spoke of Carlyle in harsh terms; but it is significant that in spite of Carlyle's perverse notions, so jarring to Whitman in many ways, the latter continued zealous in his admiration to the end. He could not blind himself to the ugly and unamiable aspects of the old sage, but always looked through them to something beyond. "It is especially easy," he said, "to get askew with a man like Carlyle: we should guard against it--for with a nature strongly perverse in some things often go the highest manifestations of nobility."³ Just as Whitman's strong attachment is shown by the generous manner in which he reacted to personal rebuffs, so also is that attachment shown by his persistently insisting, in spite of smashed idols, that "highest nobility" lay at the heart of this iconoclast. In no other of his contemporaries did Whitman overlook so much. One hesitates to say what might have been Emerson's fate had he, like Carlyle--or like Lowell, for whom Whitman showed scant respect⁴--repudiated Leaves of Grass and its author. Or fancy the place Carlyle might have held in Whitman's affections had he ever given such fervent commendation as that in Emerson's letter of 1855. But Carlyle wrote no word of commendation, never offered the slightest encouragement or recognition, even when the gift of two works invited it. On the contrary, every word that

¹Traubel, II, 366.

²Ibid.

³Traubel, II, 552.

⁴In September, 1857, Whitman wrote a fine notice of Lowell, calling him "one of the truest of our poets." (I Sit and Look Out, p. 63.) But after Lowell's unfavorable views of Leaves of Grass became known, Whitman had almost nothing good to say of him. Some of his later comments were: "I do not seem to care much about Lowell's work." (Traubel, I, 231.) "My own feeling towards him is a feeling of indifference: I don't seem impressed by him either way: I have no interest in him--when I look about in my world he is not in sight." (Traubel, I, 447.) "A sort of Coquelin off the stage as Coquelin is a sort of Lowell on the stage." (Traubel, III, 84.)

ever came to Whitman indirectly from this vigorous thinker he had chosen to admire, was distinctly unfavorable. Yet Whitman continued to admire; there seems to be but one explanation: Carlyle's personality and genius had caught his imagination, had conquered him irretrievably. "It will be difficult," he wrote in his discursive autobiography,

for the future--judging by his books, personal dis-sympathies, etc.,--to account for the deep hold this author has taken on the present age, and the way he has color'd its method and thought. I am certainly at a loss to account for it all as affecting myself. But there could be no view, or even partial picture, of the middle and later part of our nineteenth century, that did not markedly include Thomas Carlyle.¹

¹Prose Works, I, 311.

